

Teaching Gender Studies as Feminist Activism: Still Struggling for Recognition

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My name is Sara Martín Alegre. I have been teaching English Literature (and Cultural Studies) since 1991 at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and since 1998 at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. My teaching practice has always been carried out in English and mainly in degrees within English Studies, although at the Universitat Oberta I teach BA students taking degrees in Humanities and in Catalan.

I call myself a feminist, even though I belong to no feminist organization, with the exception of the Institut Interuniversitari d'Estudis de Dones i de Gènere, of which I'm not an active member. All my students at any level know about my Gender Studies research interests. So do my colleagues at the Department of English where I work and those who know me all over Spain. My Gender Studies approach to teaching and research is treated by all, except, of course, my feminist colleagues, in the worst cases with disinterest (not hostility) and in the best with polite sympathy. As happens, I specialise in Masculinities Studies and follow quite an unorthodox line regarding the feminist theorisation of Literature and Culture, which I often resist. This means that not infrequently, my work is better received by men outside Gender Studies than by feminists within the discipline. I might, however, be wrong in this impression.

Last year I answered a questionnaire sent by a research group from the University of Oviedo carrying out a project on the impact of Gender Studies on English Studies in Spain. The question that set me on the path that leads to this very personal paper was 'What is your main achievement as a teacher and researcher in Gender Studies?' The standard answer I give is that my main achievement is tied to my other main research interest: popular fictions. My whole academic career has been devoted mainly to illuminating the thorny issue of gender representation mainly in gothic and science fiction (both novels and films), secondarily in popular music. However, I gave a second answer: what achievement? The space I have managed to carve out for my

teaching and research is very fragile and can easily disappear overnight. I do know first hand. Let me explain how.

In 2006, I became the Coordinator for the new MA in 'Advanced English Studies: Literature and Culture'. I included in it a 10-credit module which I called 'The Discourses of Desire', hoping that I could finally teach a monographic Gender Studies subject (an elective one) within it. I shared this module with another teacher who had nothing to do with Gender Studies, yet I persuaded him to focus his own subject on passion and desire in Renaissance Literature (his area). In 2008-9 I took a sabbatical and when I returned, I found out that 'The Discourses of Desire' had disappeared from the newly reformed programme. I had been a tenured lecturer by then for 4 years and even the Head of Department (2005-8) –this gives an exact idea of my disempowerment. I was given instead the chance to teach a subject on the Vietnam War, which I took up. I did turn that into a Gender Studies course, though the students (all women) were quite indifferent to war narratives and masculinity. In 2011 we redesigned once more the MA and I'm currently teaching in it 'Postmodernity: New Sexualities/New Textualities', not really my title, an elective subject which I call to myself 'The Discourses of Desire (Reborn)'.

As regards the BA, although I have been teaching Gender Studies embedded in all my subjects, only next year 2014-15 will I be teaching a subject openly called 'Gender Studies (in English)'. The story of how this little miracle has come about has everything to do with my university's decision to offer a Minor in Gender Studies (30 ECTS, see: <http://www.uab.cat/web/studying/minor-in-gender-studies-1341207716784.html>). The Dean at the time, Dr. Helena Estalella, sent all Heads of Department a call to name their specialists in the area. Some Heads denied having any, even though it was not the case at all. When the first meetings were organised I was Head of Department and could also take part, thus, as an interested researcher.

In my Department we were also about to transform our BA degree into the new European-style degree (2009-), and I very boldly took the chance to convince my school, or Facultat, that the Minor needed a Gender Studies subject in English (after all, most theory came originally in that language) and also to convince my colleagues that since the Facultat was programming the Minor we had to offer an elective for it. A bit of a sleigh of hand... I'm told the Minor is working well but one thing I can tell is that the regular meetings of all teachers involved that I expected (the networking) has not happened. I don't know how students will react to my own subject as I'm not aware that many in my Department are taking the Minor. I'm not sure, either, how many from outside the Department in the Minor will be willing to face the challenge of working in English.

In my almost 23 years of teaching, then, I haven't been able to teach Gender Studies openly until 2007 within the MA and next year within the BA. I have nonetheless, as I have declared, always used a Gender Studies methodology. This has not been my only methodology, for that would be reductive. I'm interested in other matters such as class and nationalism, the material aspects of literary production, and within textuality in aspects such as film adaptation and the role of the narrator. I

assumed from the very beginning, though, that in a degree with an 85% female attendance and with quite a high rate of gay men in the remaining 15%, gender is a crucial issue. My students know this. In class, though, I make the point that I practice Gender Studies because I am myself very tired of being classified by my gender and my sexual identity when, possibly, what defines me best is my passion for reading (and for chocolate). I'm a Gender Studies specialist very much looking forward to post-gender times.

The course which I have most frequently taught is the second-year compulsory 'Victorian Literature', quite a perfect breeding ground for Gender Studies. Three years ago I designed the current syllabus together with Dr. Esther Pujolràs and we determined to teach one Dickens (either *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations*), one Brontë, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

I think the best decision I made was to teach Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* instead of the expected *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*. My point of view is that students will anyway read Charlotte and Emily Brontë, whereas Anne's novel is usually ignored undeservedly. In case you don't know anything about it I must explain that *The Tenant*, though no masterpiece, narrates very proficiently how Helen a wife abused psychologically by her rich husband, Arthur, determines to escape his tyranny at a time (the 1820s) when legally she was practically his property. Students love Anne's tale and when I asked them whether I should go back to *Wuthering Heights* in future editions of the course they replied 'no way'. I write 'go back' because it's been usually my choice to teach Emily's novel, to which I give a very critical, anti-patriarchal reading of the villain Heathcliff. I absolutely resist teaching Charlotte's sick fantasy, *Jane Eyre* for its final treatment of Rochester (and his own ill-treatment of Bertha). Briefly, the other authors, Dickens, Stevenson and Conrad are a feast for anyone interested in Masculinities Studies and this is how I approach them.

How do students react whenever a Gender Studies methodology is applied? They resist it as a) the teacher's personal quirk, b) an unnecessary addition or c) an optional methodology that can be easily dismissed even when, manifestly, the student is engaged in gendered issues. There's another odd kind of resistance. In 'Victorian Literature' we include a selection of passages from essays by Victorian eminences. Even though half of them are by women and they show a variety of circumstances, students stick to basic stereotypes. This leads to very puzzling answers to my question of why women play such a small role in Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. Most students complain that this is because women were absolutely powerless thus failing to recall the women whose public voices we read. Also failing to see that Stevenson gives a devastatingly negative portrait of men, the obvious focus of this story about the duplicity of the gentleman.

Here is where I need to clarify how I practice and teach Gender Studies. I always clarify in class that my enemy is *patriarchy*, not men, and that men should be women's allies in our anti-patriarchal fight. Next I explain that for me the concept 'gender' applies to all, men and women. I don't do 'Women's Studies' and I do

'Masculinities Studies', not 'Men's Studies.' In my subjects, I always maintain that patriarchy is also oppressive for men and that many women show the same patriarchal wish to be empowered within hegemonic patriarchy as most privileged men. I want to engage my male students in Gender Studies, and I want to persuade my heterosexual and homosexual female students that being a feminist has nothing to do with being androphobic –it's about being anti-patriarchal.

Despite the disclaimers, the stereotypes are hard to dispel. I often feel in class that young men distrust me and take up a defensive position expecting me to sooner or later insult men. I have never met any hostile attitude in class but this is because the sexist students, I think, choose to remain silent. Some students, men or women, make the mistake of pretending to take up feminist positions in their exercises to please the teacher, which does not work as practising Gender Studies must be a sincere, committed endeavour. I find female students more willing to consider gender issues, though I often have to correct a budding androphobia or, what is worse for me, a quite naïve approach to romance. I always ask young men to focus on masculinity itself, in all its variations, as I think that Gender Studies needs more men.

I think, but this is an uninformed guess, that more and more girls understand that the feminist struggle for equal rights is not over. Yet, their own experience so far (until the age of 22 or 24 at the most) has met few obstacles that call for an active feminist involvement. They realize that feminism is an urgent matter mostly when maternity intrudes around 30, though other forms of sexism may appear earlier. One of my female doctoral students was told by her boyfriend that she had to choose between her thesis and their relationship. She chose the thesis and has now a happy relationship with a man who admires her. The ex-boyfriend, by the way, is by now a doctor, which means that when he gave my student that horrid choice he was a) afraid of competition, b) demanding that she gave him her full support but not really willing to reciprocate.

This leads me to a brief consideration of academic careers. I tend to explain that, unlike the more patriarchal 'Filología Española', 'Filología Inglesa' has an important female component in Spain. My guess is that the women who make up the ranks of the full professors now beginning to retire (active since the late 1960s or early 1970s) were middle-class daughters whose families were satisfied with their choice of foreign languages, and also willing to endorse their decision to train academically abroad. These women escaping Franco's repressive 1960s Spain came across feminism in the campuses of the United States and the United Kingdom, and returned home ready for an academic career and eager to become full professors. Even though women professors are about 15% of the total number in Spain, my Department has had two for as long as I recall, and only one male professor (since 2002). This means that we, the generation born in the 1960s, should have found our own path paved by the example of these pioneering women in English Studies all over Spain, many if not all of them calling themselves feminists. The truth, however, is not that simple.

When I became Head of Department, between 2005 and 2008, I was interviewed by no less than three teams working on whether management styles

within the university were affected by gender. I had to consider these matters in depth back then and I came to the conclusion that actually all over the world the university favours most the academics who are ambitious and competitive, regardless of their gender, whereas the less competitive tend to be by-passed. The women professors in my Department are extremely competitive, successful women who believe one must sacrifice plenty for their careers, a model borrowed, whether they are aware of this or not, from patriarchy. I myself am far less competitive (and successful) but there is little I can do to change that culture and the pull of patriarchal ways over the university. It's not so much a struggle for power, as we, academics, have less and less, but, rather, a Darwinian, narcissistic race to excel, whether individually or in teams, which for me has little to do with knowledge or even with impacting society. As long as I'm busy publishing articles which few will read for the sake of my personal promotion, I'm not engaged in raising public awareness of how gender issues affect the actual lives of people—if you know what I mean.

Next and, finally, comes the matter of class. We are now at a stage when the children of the 1990s foreign migrants are reaching university age. I am myself a child of the Spanish migration that came to Catalonia in different ways throughout the 20th century. I entered university at the end of that migration, in the early 1980s, coming from a working-class background (I was the first in my family to attend university). Although the ties with my women teachers and colleagues at university have been crucial to form my own feminist identity, my impression is that those with a middle or upper-middle class background have been far less sympathetic to my work. Either because of my class origins, or because, in addition, I've brought popular culture into the university with me. Feminism does not cut across class barriers, that's my experience, nor is it more open to alternative approaches to Literature and Culture. Ironically, since the male version of the middle-class English 'filólogo' tends to keep the gentleman as an ideal, I have never had any misencounter with any of my male peers. They may have exerted their power over me in more subtle ways but never with the open hostility I have faced (just occasionally) from some women calling themselves feminists. Like it or not, that's the truth. At least, my version of it.

My own teaching practice and research is, I'm sure, also conditioned by prejudice but I always try to apply two basic principles as regards gender: a) make all students aware of how patriarchy works, particularly men; b) help academically everyone who deserves it, particularly young women and everyone who comes from a disadvantaged background. My own simple ambition is to earn for the field of Gender Studies as much respect in the classroom and among my peers as traditional Literary Studies. To be honest, MUCH more respect, for how can we understand Literature and Culture without understanding the patriarchal strictures that condition them?

Thanks.

CODA (November 2014): I am currently teaching the fourth-year BA elective 'Gender Studies (in English)', with 32 registered students, of whom 7 are men, 25 women. The syllabus may be found at <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/121835>. So far the experience is working well and I look forward to repeating it in later editions of the subject. Whether

there will be any is right now pretty much in the air, as with the recently announced reform of the BA degrees we may altogether lose the fourth year and all the electives from 2016 onwards.



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